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THE ENGLISH ROMANTIC WRITERS AS DRAMATISTS

English Romanticism, it is generally admitted, produced novels, essays and poems that rank among the highest products of English literature. Yet in one branch of creative literature, the drama, it failed signally. The drama has seldom passed through a more barren period than that in which the brilliant Romantic writers of the early nineteenth century won their reputations. The general student of literature, if he reflects on this condition at all, generally explains it to his own satisfaction by saying that the age was interested chiefly in poetry and that the poets did not care to write drama. This explains nothing, however, for there is no reason why a lyric poet cannot also be a dramatist, as in the case of many of the Elizabethans. Moreover, the romantic poets were not indifferent to drama. Almost without exception they attempted to write it—and failed. Somewhere within themselves or within the general spirit of the age there were conditions that inhibited this brilliant group of English writers from achieving the dramatic success which they desired and which might superficially be expected of them.

Anyone considering this situation from a purely theatrical point of view might be inclined to account for it solely on the ground of technical deficiencies. Undoubtedly many of the plays in question did have conspicuous structural weaknesses, as Dr. W. S. McNeill has shown by detailed analyses in his *History of the English Drama from 1788-1832*.¹ Technical craftsmanship was somewhat beneath the study of a Romantic genius. In writing *Otho the Great*, for instance, Keats merely supplied the poetry for the speeches as his friend Brown sketched them out,—a plan which required—and demonstrated—no more technical knowledge of drama on Keats's part than did the writing of *The Eve of Saint Agnes*. The best of the Romantic dramas, Shelley's *The Cenci*, may be taken as fairly typical in its structural weaknesses. This play has been subjected to detailed analysis in three doc-

¹ Harvard ms., 1909,

toral theses,² to practical examination by several theatrical producers who considered staging it, and to actual test by the Shelley Society's production of the play in 1886. The conclusions have varied somewhat in detail, but have practically agreed in general import: the play has been found to be over-motivated in minor parts, insufficiently motivated in the character of Count Cenci, disjected by Cenci's death, and almost devoid of progression except for the scenes centering about Cenci's death and Beatrice's trial. As Shelley's clear-headed friend, Peacock, remarked, "it is unquestionably not a work for the modern English stage", and this would be true even if there were no other faults than structural ones. Yet the structural inadequacy of this and many other plays is far from affording a satisfactory explanation of the general failure of the Romantic writers as dramatists. Structural defects are often an accidental rather than a fundamental cause of failure in the drama. Often they are due to initial ignorance and are overcome by practical experience. Moreover, the theatre of the early nineteenth century frequently accepted plays that were structurally weak. The Romantic writers were not all as ignorant of the stage as Shelley. Some of them had excellent opportunities for acquiring the technique of the stage, had it been in them to do so. Charles Lamb knew the stage through constant attendance and wrote dramatic criticism. Byron was an even more regular playgoer and during 1815 was one of the three directors of the Drury Lane Theatre. Probably the inspiration and the impatience of restraint which characterized the Romantic writers made it especially easy for them to slight the exacting technical requirements of the stage. The question is one of temperament rather than of accidental ignorance. Even so, there were two Romantic poets, Coleridge and Byron, who had sufficient technique to attain the stage and hold it for considerable runs. Technical incompetence is, at best, therefore, only a very partial explanation of the failure of the Romantic dramatists, because it is neither an insuperable handicap nor was it common to all the writers in question.

² W. S. McNeill: *op. cit.*; E. S. Bates: *Shelley's Drama, The Cenci*; and N. I. White: *Shelley's Dramatic Poems*, Harvard ms., 1918.

Neither can a common explanation be found in lack of interest due either to the debasement of the stage and its audience or to the prevalence of non-dramatic types in the literature of the period. A good play might fail to achieve popular success as a result of these conditions. These conditions might also account for an author's unwillingness to write for the stage, but they cannot account for ineptitude and inadequacy in the plays that *were* written. Dr. McNeill quotes several writers, including Scott and Byron, in strong condemnation of contemporary audiences and concludes that this partly explains the failure of the great literary figures of the day to become interested in the drama. This lack of interest, however, is more easily assumed than demonstrated. If writing drama is any proof of interest in the drama, the best poets and essayists of the day were almost unanimously interested. Wordsworth and Southey each wrote one drama; Coleridge wrote three; Scott, five and one dramatic sketch; Keats, one and a fragment; Godwin, two; Byron, seven and a fragment; Shelley, four and several fragments; and Beddoes, Lamb, Landor and Proctor also wrote dramas or dramatic sketches. Not a few of these writers essayed the stage. Wordsworth tried to get *The Borderers* accepted and failed; Shelley had the same experience with *The Cenci*, and Coleridge's *Osorio* was at first rejected but was later staged with considerable success as *Remorse*. Scott's *The House of Aspen* was refused. Godwin and Lamb succeeded in getting plays accepted only to see them promptly damned. Keats's play was declined, but Proctor achieved a stage success with *Mirandola*. Byron protested that his plays were not written to be acted, but most of them reached the stage and were acted with some success. Plainly the Romantic writers were not uninterested in drama; they were merely, as a group, unsuccessful with it.

There is one general connection between all these plays that throws a somewhat paradoxical light on their general dramatic inadequacy. This is a common touch of Shakespearean and Elizabethan diction and form. The Elizabethan structure and the large number of Shakespearean parallels commonly noted in Shelley's *The Cenci* are but the signs of a very general and pervasive influence. Scott's plays show the Elizabethan form with a slight

sprinkling of Shakespearean language. Coleridge's *Remorse* contains a number of distinct parallels to Shakespearean lines, particularly certain passages in *Hamlet*. The plays of Wordsworth, Keats and Lamb are Elizabethan in structure and furnish many echoes of Shakespeare's lines. Byron's historical plays are a professed reaction against Elizabethan drama, but the lines parallel Shakespeare's in many instances, particularly in *Marino Faliero*. The general and acute interest of the early nineteenth century in Shakespeare and the Elizabethans is evident to even the most casual student of the period. It is shown in the many collections and new editions of old plays, in the lectures and essays of Coleridge, Hazlitt and Lamb, and in the practice of the stage. Many of the successful plays of the day were Elizabethan in form; Massinger, Jonson, and Beaumont and Fletcher had not yet entirely disappeared from the stage; and Shakespeare, between 1788 and 1832, was represented by from six to seventeen different plays annually at Drury Lane and Covent Garden.³ A glance at the principal magazines of the period shows that *The Gentleman's Magazine* alone contained 145 articles and notes on Elizabethan and Shakespearean subjects between 1800 and 1825. *Blackwood's Magazine* contained twenty from 1817 to 1825; *The Monthly Magazine* thirty-five from 1800 to 1816; and *The New Monthly Magazine* twenty-five from 1814 to 1825.

The influence of the greatest English dramatists, one would think, would naturally be in the direction of sound dramatic conceptions. That it was not may be due to the fact that the writers were imitative in a slavish, pseudo-classical manner rather than independent with a genuine Romantic originality. This seems to have been the idea of Beddoes, himself an Elizabethan imitator, when he exclaimed that "these re-animations are vampire-cold" and that the man to awaken the drama must be "a bold trampling fellow".⁴ Perhaps the sound, tragic *ethos* of Shakespeare was less easily perceived because Gothic horror had invaded both the novel and the stage.

³ McNeill, *op. cit.*

⁴ Letters of Thomas Lovel Beddoes, p. 50, quoted by S. C. Chew in *The Dramas of Lord Byron*.

But the principal and really significant reason why Shakespeare failed to benefit his Romantic admirers is that they concentrated their attention upon the less fundamentally dramatic elements in his plays. "He was not only a great poet, but a great philosopher", Coleridge⁵ told his audience, forgetting to mention that he was also a great dramatist. Ethical and personal conflict evolved out of human motives and determined in accordance with human standards of truth and justice is the most fundamental element in drama. Coleridge and his contemporaries probably realized Shakespeare's greatness in this respect, but their main interest ran to the beauty of isolated passages, to metaphysical refinements in motivation, and to rapturous exaltation of characters as true human pictures rather than as personal dramatic agents in a great ethical conflict. Nor were they helped to a sounder conception of Shakespeare's real dramatic qualities by the practice of the professional playwright. From D'Avenant and Dryden's fantastically elaborated version of *The Tempest*, down to the less offensive adaptations of George Colman, Shakespeare had been freely tampered with to make him fit the fashion of the hour. Authentic versions had been acted, but other versions garbled in the interest of 'taste' or decked out in the interest of spectacle had generally been the more popular. In an age whose tendency was to react against conventions and to explore the remoter recesses of time, space and personality, which regarded genius principally as the expression of individuality and the Elizabethans as types of free and spontaneous genius, it was but natural that the central and more deeply representative qualities of Shakespeare should be slurred over in favor of elements more congenial to the spirit of the age. Even to-day there is something of the same eccentricity in the dominant critical attitude toward Shakespeare. Books that approach Shakespeare from the standpoint of practical drama, like Professor Baker's *Shakespeare's Development as a Dramatist*, are few in number and comparatively recent. Our enjoyment of Shakespeare has been greatly augmented by the subtle psychologizing of Coleridge, the appreciative flashes of Lamb and the character

⁵*Lectures on Shakespeare*, Coleridge's *Works*, N. Y., 1854, vii, 66.

studies of Hazlitt, but the enjoyment is more literary than dramatic. The methods of these critics would apply as well to the *Canterbury Tales* as to *Julius Cæsar*. Shakespeare is undoubtedly more valuable to the world in general as poet and philosopher than as dramatist; but his value as a dramatic model depends not on his poetry and philosophy, but on his fundamental dramatic qualities.

It was at this point that his influence on the Romantic dramatists became perverted. Such titles as *The Characters of Shakespeare's Dramas*, *The Beauties of Massinger*, and *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets*, with the emphasis on *Characters*, *Beauties*, and *Specimens*, indicate the trend of Romantic dramatic appreciation. The popularity of such books (together with the emphasis on the purely poetic that we find in Coleridge, Hazlitt and the magazine reviews), explains why Lamb, in his *Essay on the Tragedies of Shakespeare*, could maintain the paradox that Shakespeare, of all dramatists, was least adapted to the stage. When we have staged Shakespeare, says Lamb, "we have only materialized and brought down a fine vision to the standard of flesh and blood". This may be very true, according to our present notions, but it would probably have sounded rather distressing to Shakespeare, who posed for so many years as a successful practical dramatist, with a decided partiality for standards of flesh and blood. No wonder that Shakespeare could not make dramatists of his romantic admirers! The Elizabethan imitators could attain good blank verse, as in Shelley's *The Cenci*; they could attain tragic scenes; and sometimes they could even create character; but the central tragic idea, which they slighted in Shakespeare, they likewise slighted in their own plays.

William Hazlitt has suggested another circumstance to account for the dramatic impotence of his age. In his essay *On Dramatic Poetry* Hazlitt finds a common cause in a general tendency to abstraction which he traces to the French Revolution, and which, in preventing men like Godwin, Coleridge and Wordsworth from getting out of intellectual abstraction into the particular and concrete, made it impossible for them to create real characters. A review of the dramas themselves establishes the

truth of Hazlitt's observation and indicates one or two additional common weaknesses.

Wordsworth's *The Borderers*, Scott's *Sensuality and Revenge*, and Coleridge's *Remorse* all belong to a class in which psychological analysis provides the main interest. With Coleridge and Wordsworth at least, this analysis is merely the author's toying with his own mental projections, and is tinged with abnormality. Thus Oswald, in *The Borderers*, consumes numerous lines inciting Marmaduke to murder, and later defends his conduct by picturing murder as intellectual emancipation. In the case of *Remorse* we get the unusual and unnatural motive of Alvar seeking to revenge an attempted assassination by inspiring the villain with remorse. It is significant that Coleridge said he liked this play because it embodied "certain pet abstract notions".⁶ Southey's *Wat Tyler* and Coleridge's *The Fall of Robespierre* are types of the drama of revolutionary struggle where the republicanism is stronger than the drama. Godwin's dramas show us the political doctrinaire making characters out of abstract ideas. Scott's *The House of Aspen* is a thoroughgoing melodrama of terror dealing with mediæval Germany. Aside from blood-curdling incident it has nothing to excite interest. Scott himself referred to it as his "Germanized brat". All Scott's other plays derive their principal value—which is small—from their lyrics and historical background. *The Doom of Devorgoil*, in particular, is intolerably narrative; its characters having the reminiscent enthusiasm of an Ancient Mariner. In these plays we encounter the same return to the past that is to be met in Scott's novels and poems, but no Jeanie Deans or Edie Ochiltree. Shelley's *The Cenci* does indeed have the appearance of great tragedy, but breaks down under closer analysis. Objective as it seems to be, it does not in reality get beyond the great abstract triangle of Tyrant, Slave and Rebel which robs practically all Shelley's plays and narrative poems of real humanity and makes him the most abstract of all the Romanticists. Ignorance of humanity, preoccupation with abstract notions, and, to a less degree, ignorance of the stage, all combined to render Shelley's dramatic

⁶ McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

aspirations hopeless. Of all the early Romanticists who attempted drama, Byron alone approached success.

Such dramatic poems as *Cain*, *Heaven and Earth*, *The Deformed Transformed*, and *Manfred* have little in common with real drama. There is too much lack of control, too much rebellion, super-terrestrialism and supernaturalism about them to conform to the standards of flesh and blood so provokingly insisted upon for acted—and actual—drama. The three historical plays, however, *Marino Faliero*, *The Two Foscari*, and *Sardanapalus*, are dramas of considerable force. Theatrically, they are fairly adequate. It is true that they are somewhat burdened with long speeches, but, unlike *The Cenci*, each scene has its theatrical value in advancing action or explaining motive or character. The motivation of the minor characters is good, but Byron, like Shelley, sometimes fails in the larger problems of motivation. He represents Marino Faliero, a man seventy-five years of age and Doge of Venice, as being goaded into attempting to overthrow the state because a scurrilous insult has gone inadequately punished. In *The Two Foscari* Jacopo is made to love Venice so much that he commits a crime in order that he may be taken back for trial, although he well knows the penalty. Byron made the Shelleyan mistake of confounding historic with dramatic truth when he defended these insufficient motives by citing historical proof. In *Sardanapalus* also he has considerable difficulty in making the main character appear reasonable and consistent.

Byron's range of character is narrow. Although his characters, on analysis, are more real than Shelley's, for some reason they make a much fainter impression on the memory. Trelawny said that Byron formed his opinions of people from books and knew little that about them personally. His heroes are mostly himself and his heroines La Guiccioli. We find a great deal of Byron in *Manfred*, *Marino*, *Cain* and *Sardanapalus*. In *Myrrha* and *Adah* we see La Guiccioli, and she is not entirely absent from the characters of Angiolina Faliero and Marina Foscari. Zarina recalls Lady Byron, and the mysterious Astarte is probably either Byron's half-sister, Augusta, or his early love, Mary Chaworth. The Byronic scepticism, the Byronic gloom, the Byronic rebel-

lion, pride and contempt for the rabble, the Byronic indolence and fatalism, even the individual misdeeds and personal sensitiveness of Byron—here we have all the material from which Byron's protagonists are constructed, and here we have Byron almost as strictly confined as was Shelley within the great Shelleyan triangle. Even although he was able, more than any of the greater Romanticists except Scott, to view life concretely instead of abstractly, it availed him not enough. Seeing life almost as it was, he was able to come closer to the heart of real tragedy than any other Romanticist. With him the struggle is not between abstract good and evil, as with Shelley and Godwin, nor between mere mental projections, as with Wordsworth and Coleridge, but between characters neither wholly bad nor wholly good and experiencing within themselves the world-old conflict of good and evil impulses. The protagonist falls because his view of life is one-sided; but the natural order which triumphs is not the natural order that we see prevail at the downfall of Macbeth, Iago and Edmund. A natural order of rebellious courts and corrupt governments is a natural order with which we can hardly be satisfied. Perhaps Byron the rebel could not bring himself to make his rebellious heroes fall before a natural order that was immutably right, for that would have been condemning himself. Because he had the objective viewpoint Byron did come very near to writing great drama, but because he was held like a vise in his own egotism he fell short of complete success.

The spirit of great drama rests at the centre of human nature and can be evoked only by a deep knowledge of humanity. For two or three underlying causes, all the early Romantic writers wandered away from the centre. Some, like Godwin, Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge, could not get beyond their own abstract ideas. Others, like Byron, could not get beyond their own personal qualities, and avoid presenting themselves again and again in their characters. Shelley partook of this failing also; in all his protagonists, from Prometheus to Beatrice, we find him idealizing his own best qualities. Some, like Scott, Coleridge in *Zapolya* and Lamb in *John Woodville*, turned back too ardently into the past or into foreign countries, forgetting dramatic truth in truth of setting, and forgetting that Shake-

speare, whether at Rome or Athens, presented always the Elizabethan Londoner. "Hang the age", exclaimed Lamb, "I will write for antiquity!"—and so he did, so far as the drama is concerned, along with several contemporaries. Some failed through an inadequate knowledge of humanity. How could Wordsworth, who retired from man into nature and knew few books; or Coleridge, who knew books but not men; ever hope to reach that intimate sympathy with normal human nature upon which great drama must be based? How could Shelley, who, according to Trelawny, "had seen no more of the working-day world than a girl at a boarding-school", and according to Byron had "a total want of worldly wisdom", ever really comprehend human nature? He realized himself that he could not. "As to real flesh and blood," he remarks in a passage that has been well-worn by subsequent quotation, "you know that I do not deal in those articles"—and his whole life and works show that this was true.

Hazlitt was right when he concluded that the spirit of the age ran counter to great drama. Impatience of the drudgery of mere technical craftsmanship; a distorted interest in the costumes, manners and theatrical forms of the past; a perverted view of a great dramatic model; an incorrigible interest in the abstract rather than the concrete; and that peculiar absorption in self known as Romantic egotism—all these elements, so characteristic of the age, are to be found in different combinations inhibiting even the greatest of the Romanticists from writing great drama. The same qualities that were responsible for much of the charm of Romantic lyric poetry and personal essays stood squarely between the Romanticists and the dramatic success which they sought.

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